

**The Qur'an and contemporary Muslim understanding of modesty:
the case of the Aziz's wife.**

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The lecture begins in a typical Australian setting—the beach at Christmas, 2003—and presents a scene of Muslim men and women there. I pose the question of how Muslim men and women in Australia in particular appear to understand modesty in dress. I explore Sura 12 of the Qur'an to bring fundamental teaching about modesty to the discussion. The sura deals with the story of Yusuf and his attempted seduction by the Aziz's wife (she is known as Potiphar's wife in the account in the Jewish scriptures). I also use Sura 24, in conjunction with Sura 12, to highlight issues of sexuality, desire, and modesty and relate these back to the beach scene which I presented at the outset of the lecture.

It is Christmas Day 2003, a beautiful sunny day with a light breeze, not too hot, and a perfect day for the beach. I have just finished my swim for the day and notice again the large group of what I presume to be a Muslim family and friends. They have been at the beach every day for the last week. Why do I presume that they are Muslim? Because every female member of the group is wearing a hijab¹ (veil). They are also dressed in loose jeans or long skirts, long sleeve shirts with a vest or light cardigan over them. The women go for a swim but do not remove any piece of clothing beforehand. I am not just talking about a knee-deep paddle—they are body surfing the waves back into the shore. I am deeply moved by the commitment of the women who accept the restriction of movement and perhaps of enjoyment in the surf with so much material around their bodies. At the same time, I am struck by the sight of the men in the group who stand out against the women in such strong contrast because they are only wearing board shorts.

Geraldine Brooks tells a similar story about Iranian Muslim women swimming at the Caspian Sea in their chadors, while their men wore swimsuits that did not even cover

¹ Wherever possible I have used the familiar English forms of Arabic words and names; where this has been impossible I have used the system based on the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. No diacritical marks are used. The *hamza*, as in Qur'an, is thus indicated (') and the letter *ayn* is indicated by a left quotation mark (').

their navels.² Brooks uses this example, along with many others, to suggest that Muslim men hypocritically flout the Qur’anic injunctions to modesty while they bring public pressure and state laws to bear in forcing women into hijab. Brooks draws a different conclusion to mine, focussing on the danger of the female body. However, I want to take a very different point of view in this paper to enquire more deeply into what the Muslim community, and particularly the men, might understand themselves in their lived experience about such a scene. To do this, I first want to look briefly at the setting of the beach and what that space might represent for Australians, Muslims included, and then I would like to reach back to two Qur’anic passages—the first in Sura 24:30-31 which presents revelations about modesty and dress, and the second in Sura 12 where we find the story of Yusuf and the Aziz’s wife who perhaps can teach us something about the issue of women’s attraction to men that has implications for the modest dress of men.

Most Australians would recognise that there is a certain culture particular to beachside suburbs and towns but would also acknowledge (perhaps unconsciously) that what a person wears on the beach is not necessarily appropriate for wearing on public transport to get to and from the beach. There is a dress code of sorts but one not recognised with the term “modesty”, although it may underpin notions of what is appropriate to wear in certain spaces. Has modesty ever been a concern for the majority of beach goers? It may not be well-known that there are early nineteenth century reports about the working classes in Sydney who swam nude publicly while the upper classes retreated to the privacy of their bathing houses.³ Perhaps partly to counteract the public nudity, swimming publicly or “bathing” as it was referred to in the early 1900s was regulated by baths along the harbour, the first of them the now famous Boy Charlton pool.⁴ At the same time, there have been a series of styles of swimming costumes, from the early neck-to-knee bathers in the 1930s and 40s, followed by loose swimming trunks and long one-piece costumes, to the ever briefer two-piece and bikini costumes for women and

² Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, Sydney: Anchor Books, 1994, pp. 31-2.

³ Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture Since 1788*, South Melbourne: Longman, 1995, p. 41.

⁴ Leone Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2001, p. 33.

Speedos for men from the 1960s onwards. However, even in the 1960s there were certain ethnic groups that were recognisable on the beach for wearing much more clothing. People from Wollongong have told me they remember groups of new migrants from Mediterranean countries who settled there in the 1970s who sat on the beach or paddled in the surf fully clothed. The current trend of board shorts and sun shirts for women and men is sparked more by a fear of the sun than by issues about modesty.

Leone Huntsman describes Australia's coastline in terms of how the land ends abruptly and the sea takes over very visibly: "all Australians share this reality of containment. Wherever we go we eventually run up against an edge, which is mostly also a beach..."⁵ It seems clear then that eventually most Australians must contact and deal with the beach. Huntsman also writes of the beach as a neutral zone, a kind of "no man's land", where different groups come together who have an equal right to be there.⁶ It is not private space since it is shared with others, but it is not like other more formal public spaces in which dress, or lack of it, would be much more strictly regulated. As I sat on the beach watching the Muslim families, I wondered how the construction of these spaces affected the various members. As the family left, the men put on t-shirts before getting into the car to move beyond the beach space. I imagine when they returned home they may actually have put on more clothes than they were wearing at the beach, while the women may have taken off their hijabs and other items in the privacy of the home. I wondered if the seeming incongruity of this situation occurred to any of the women.

You might be surprised that I have chosen to focus on the men in my reflections at the beach. Perhaps you were expecting me to talk about the women and the issue of veiling, because that is what we are used to when Western scholars or the popular press write about modesty and Muslims. When Geraldine Brooks paints a similar scene of a Sydney beach at the very end of her book, although the Muslim woman in question sits on the beach rather than swimming, she focuses only on the experience of the woman that she

⁵ Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls*, p. 170.

⁶ Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls*, p. 214.

interprets as someone foregoing the pleasure enjoyed by her baby daughter in the surf with her father.⁷

Few subjects receive more attention as an issue unique to Muslims than that of women's dress, specifically veiling. Believers and non-believers alike emphasise this issue to categorise, stereotype or try to understand Muslim women, often with significant political and social implications. A good example is provided by the Muslim scholar Homa Hoodfar who suggests that "veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings". Moreover, for Hoodfar the veil is a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling women's lives, while at the same time women have used the same social institution to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy.⁸ In the political, religious and social issue that veiling has become, we can lose sight of where the discussion must begin, that is in Sura 24:30-31.

The context for the injunction on veiling in sura 24 is a concern for modesty, a rule that applies to men as well as women, as Yusuf Ali and others points out.⁹ Verse 30 states "*Qul-lil-Mu'-miniina yaghuzuu min 'absaarihim wa yahfazuu furuujahum:*" "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty". Verse 31 begins with "*Wa qul-lil-Mu'-minaati yaghuzuzna min 'absaarihinna wa yahfazna furuujahunna:*" "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty". However, unlike the preceding verse, verse 31 goes on to give specifics on how women should guard their modesty. We could argue for some time over what the verses about women's veiling mean – how much women are to cover and so on – and we could look at the long history of how both women and interpreters have looked at the verses and found a practical way of implementing them in everyday life.¹⁰

⁷ Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p. 239.

⁸ Homa Hoodfar, "The veil in their minds and on our heads: The persistence of colonial images of Muslim women", in *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22 (3/4), 5-18, p. 5.

⁹ A. Yusuf Ali *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1934, 1994, p. 905, note 2983.

¹⁰ Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, Oxford: Berg, 1999 gives an eloquent overview of the historical development and complex nature of the term hijab. She writes that the same word "hijab" is used to refer to amulets that are carried on one's person to protect against harm. Another form of the word "hijab" literally means "eyebrow" or "protector of the eye" and was used in the time of the caliphs for their officers who screened people who requested an audience with the caliph, p. 157.

Perhaps unfortunately for men, no further direction is given about how to guard their modesty. They are simply warned that Allah is watching them *'innallaha Khabiiirumbimaa yasna-'uun*. However, commentators like Mawdudi have suggested that the verse should be interpreted to mean that a man's private region should be covered from navel to knee.¹¹ If this interpretation is correct, it implies that men require far less covering to be modest; that there is no danger that women will be tempted by seeing more of their bodies. Does this mean that how men dress has no implication for social and religious stability?¹² While the men I saw at the beach may have been acting according to the letter of the Sura as interpreted by Mawdudi and others, even though the board-shorts were lower on the hips than would be permissible under this ruling, nevertheless I am interested in the attitude that shows through in their behaviour and what they might understand by what they are doing.

Rather than attribute an uncaring attitude to the men, let me explore rather the possibility that there is a general assumption that men do not need to go covered to be modest, that their uncovered bodies do not tempt women. Wherever such an idea might originate, it certainly does not seem possible to trace it back to the Qur'an because the Qur'an certainly implies that both women and men can be tempted by the beauty of the opposite sex. I want to argue this point by a close reading of Sura 12 concerning Yusuf and the Aziz's wife, the woman who in the later tradition of the Hadith is referred to as Zulaykha.¹³ In particular I will follow the course of events in the story from Zulaykha's point of view because her reactions to Yusuf tell us something of women and their attraction to men, at least as put forward by the Qur'an.

Barbara Stowasser suggests that the story of Zulaykha is one of the most interpreted sections of the Qur'an, and one of the most complex, because of the themes of female desire and cunning and how they are woven together with the themes of love, repentance,

¹¹ Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Tafhim al-Qur'an*, trans. and ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1993, vol. VI, Surahs 22-24, p. 226.

¹² "[I]n Muslim societies men's bodies just weren't seen as posing the same kind of threat to social stability as women's"; Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, p. 32.

¹³ Mawdudi traces the name from the Talmud; *Tafhim al-Qur'an*, , vol. IV, Surahs 10-16 p. 160.

honesty and fidelity.¹⁴ She writes further “this tale embodies the worst and the best in a woman’s nature on the terrestrial plain. Of all the Qur’anic women’s stories, it may be the richest and most penetrating in terms of female psychology”.¹⁵

We do not have the time to go through every verse of the story in detail, so I will focus on those verses which are of the most importance to our understanding of Zulaykha. There is a great deal of dialogue in the story, and Anthony Johns comments on this aspect of the story:

Dialogue is notoriously difficult to transfer from one language to another in a way fully faithful to the original, taking account of such factors as context, point of view, intonation and ellipsis. Moreover, although dialogue is indeed verbal communication, individuals engaged in dialogue do not communicate by verbal means alone. Thus dialogue is not fully intelligible to an ‘eavesdropper’ from another place and time, or from outside the community of Islam.¹⁶

I have done the best I can with the close reading that follows, but I am also hampered by my position as an “eavesdropper”.

Sura 12, verse 21 tells us that Zulaykha is the wife of “Al Aziz”. Baidawi, al Tabari and Ibn Abbas describe him as one in charge of the treasuries of Egypt,¹⁷ Mawdudi that he is an officer of the royal bodyguard, following biblical and Talmudic accounts.¹⁸ Whatever the case, it is clear that Zulaykha is the wife of a man of status. Perhaps, she is also used to him therefore, as a man who is used to getting what he wants and giving commands.

¹⁴ Stowasser, Barbara Freyer, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 50-51. See especially the extensive note 2, p. 148, on the issue of human emotions and psychological lessons from this sura.

¹⁵ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, p. 50.

¹⁶ A.H. Johns, ‘The Quranic presentation of the Joseph story: naturalistic or formulaic language?’ in *Approaches to the Qur’an*, eds G.R. Hawting & Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, Routledge, London 1993, p. 41.

¹⁷ A.F.L. Beeston, *Baidawi’s commentary on surah 12 of the Qur’an* (text, accompanied by an interpretative rendering and notes), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963, p. 12.

¹⁸ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 159.

She is commanded by him to make Yusuf's stay honourable/comfortable. In fact the verse goes on to imply far more when she learns that her husband may actually intend that Yusuf become a member of the family household, an adopted son no less. While we never hear the outcome of this suggestion, there is certainly a degree of intimacy involved in the intention to include Yusuf in the household.

The next time we meet Zulaykha in v.22, we know that Yusuf is still in the household and has attained full manhood. In fact the following verse tells us that it is in *her house* in which we find the fully-grown Yusuf as a story of seduction begins to unfold. The story comes straight to the point. She locks the doors, seeking to seduce him. Al Sabouni says, "she tried to seduce with kindness but wickedly".¹⁹ Qortobi says "from the Hadith we can tell there were 7 doors and that she could not wait for him."²⁰

Zulaykha utters the command, "Now come", however, the Arabic *hay-ta laka* is more seductive than the English translation 'now come' or 'come now'. Al Bahr writes that 'come to me' means 'come to me very quickly, right now'²¹, which suggests that her desire is very strong and she is ready for him. Similarly Baidawi says either to translate as "come on make haste" or "I am ready".²²

Yusuf responds by taking refuge in Allah, and by making other excuses about being in his master's house.²³ Abu Assoadkd says, "that Yusuf sought refuge in Allah because it was too tempting".²⁴ Al Sabouni writes that "Allah was *waiting* for Yusuf to ask for help and that without Allah's help he would have succumbed".²⁵ Both commentators obviously consider that Yusuf is attracted to Zulaykha and can only resist with the help of

¹⁹ Al Sabouni, Mohammad Ali, *Safwat Atafasaseer*, supported by Al Tabari – Al-Kashaaf, Al Qortobi, Al Alwassy, Ibn Kathir, Al Bahhr, Al Mohhit. 9th ed. Cairo: Dar-Al Sabouni, 1978, vol 2, pp. 47-48.

²⁰ Qortobi 9/163 in Al Sabouni, *Safwat Atafasaseer*, vol 2, p. 47. See also Baidawi in Beeston, Baidawai, p. 14.

²¹ Al Bahr 5/293 in Al Sabouni, *Safwat Atafasaseer*, vol 2, p. 47.

²² Beeston, Baidawi p. 14, Ibn Kathir gives a list of six other scholars who also read it with the meaning "I am ready for you" p. 153.

²³ Some interpreters prefer to emphasise here that it is Allah who has provided the house – rabbi refers to Allah rather than the Aziz. Beeston, Baidawi, p. 14; Mawdudi, *Tafhim al-Qur'an*, pp. 161-2.

²⁴ Abu Assoadkd in Al Sabouni *Safwat Atafasaseer*, p. 47.

²⁵ Al Sabouni *Safwat Atafasaseer*, p. 47.

Allah. In other words both Yusuf and Zulaykha are involved in feelings of passion and only one is able to resist because of Allah's help. She desires him, and, but for Allah, he would have desired her. Zulaykha may have initiated the action, but the dual ending used in the phrase *hammat bihii* alerts us that both are involved in the desiring, and many tafsir scholars support this line of interpretation. Beeston sums up succinctly as follows:

La-qad hammat bihi wa-hamma biha “She desired to have intercourse with him and he desired it with her’. *hamma bi-* means ‘to aim at and resolve on’ a thing. From it comes *humam* [‘hero’], one who, when he plans a thing, carries it out. What is meant by Joseph’s desiring her is natural propensity and the struggling of carnal feelings, not a rationally chosen purpose.²⁶

Referring to Baidawi’s commentary, Johns says Baidawi makes it clear that “the temptation is real... it involves a struggle for him... She desired to make love with him, and as a young man subject to passion, he with her.”²⁷

Zulaykha is not a woman to let the moment go without a struggle—verse 25 describes how she races after him as he makes for the door (he is obviously innocent or perhaps recognises that he’s out of his depth and needs to retreat) and grabs his shirt from the back, tearing it in the process. Finding her husband at the door, with quick thinking she accuses Yusuf of having formed an evil design against her. Baidawi suggests she desires “to clear her honour in her husband’s opinion and make him jealous of Joseph, and incite him against Joseph, by way of getting her revenge”.²⁸ Likewise Ibn Kathir comments on the deceit of her response and that it is an evil plot as she tries to exonerate herself and implicate Yusuf.²⁹

²⁶ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 15.

²⁷ A.H. Johns, Exegesis as an expression of Islamic Humanism: Approaches, Concerns and Insights of al-Baidawi, in *hamdard Islamicus*, vol XX11 Oct-Dec 1999 No. 4 pp. 42; 49a.

²⁸ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 16. Johns notes Baidawi’s explanation of Zulaykha’s psychological state, noting that in this scene the “unexpected encounter with her husband is the apogee of an arc of tension in the development of the episode”; A.H.Johns, Exegesis as an expression of Islamic Humanism p. 49b.

²⁹ Ibn Kathir, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Abridged 10 vols, Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000, vol 5, p. 156.

In verse 26, Zulaykha must face a counter-accusation from Yusuf, backed up by a witness from the household. Upon considering the evidence and accepting his wife's guilt, (v. 28) the Aziz makes a statement, not to his wife, but rather about all women: *min-kaydi kunna!* (*kaydi* = plot; *kunna* = group of women), meaning that women are the worst to plot things. Baidawi concurs that "the plural pro-noun is addressed to her and those like her, or to women as a whole."³⁰ Where the text uses the word *aziimun* (great) of women's tricks/craftiness Baidawi characterises this greatness as meaning "subtler, more insinuating and with greater effect on the mind, and because by it they outface men and by it Satan whispers stealthily."³¹

Zulaykha is subsequently commanded by the Aziz to ask for forgiveness (v 29) because she has been at fault. Ibn Kathir considers that the Aziz shows himself in this passage to be an easy man, excusing his wife, "because she saw in Yusuf an appeal she could not resist".³² This is the first real intimation the reader has that perhaps it is not all Zulaykha's fault.

But the story doesn't end there. Zulaykha obviously feels that she had good reason for what she did and seeks to defend her actions. She sets up an event that will make the reason for her behaviour clear to all those ladies who have been gossiping about her "violent love" (verse 30).³³ Al Sabouni says '*Shaghafa-haa hubbaa* means deeply in love – she wasn't just sexually attracted but deeply in love'.³⁴ Baidawi speaks of Zulaykha's heart as pierced by Yusuf. He focuses on the word *shaghaf*, the membrane of the heart, and says that Yusuf has pierced this "until he has penetrated to her inmost heart with love [for him]".³⁵ Ibn Kathir writes "her love for him filled her heart and engulfed it".³⁶ Again, with these comments, it appears further that Zulaykha is not entirely to blame.

³⁰ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 17.

³¹ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 17

³² Ibn Kathir, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Abridged by Shaykh Safiur-Rahman Al-Barakpuri, Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000, vol 5, p. 158.

³³ Al Sabouni, Safwat Atafasaseer writes '*at bimakrihinna* suggests evil, wicked, malicious talk done behind the Aziz' wife's back, vol 2, p. 50.

³⁴ Al Sabouni, Safwat Atafasaseer, vol 2, p. 50.

³⁵ Beeston, Baidawi, pp. 17-18.

³⁶ Ibn Kathir, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, vol 5 p. 160.

In verse 31 Zulaykha prepares a banquet and invites the gossiping women to it. She orders Yusuf to come out before them—he is clearly still there in the household and still at her command! —and when they see him, the women are astounded and cut their hands with their knives, apparently not feeling anything, so entranced are they by Yusuf’s beauty. Zulaykha has prepared a banquet with many good enticing things to look at, a truly beautiful sight, but it pales into insignificance when Yusuf enters and all eyes go straight to him. Thus is Zulaykha vindicated—all the women feel the same way that she does, a fact mentioned in all the major commentaries³⁷. In a lovely irony, the women call on Allah for protection against Yusuf’s seemingly angelic beauty (“Allah preserve us”), just as Yusuf called on Allah earlier for protection against her (“May Allah grant me refuge”). Both men and women need help and protection from Allah if they are to avoid the temptation aroused in them by the beauty of the opposite sex.

But Zulaykha has not given up. Qortobi writes, “she had no shame left or fear of blame from other people”.³⁸ Zulaykha remains attracted to Yusuf and keeps trying to seduce him. She tries once more, threatening him with the alternative of prison and humiliation if he does not give in to her wishes (verse 32). Yusuf refuses. Azamakhshari writes ‘Allah chose the word *fasta’ sama* because it is one of the deepest forms of the word for refusal’³⁹—it is refusal with strong or deep reservation.

Yusuf takes refuge in prison (verse 33), and the story continues with his experiences there, but returns to Zulaykha in verses 51-53 where we are given a lengthy version of her confession of guilt before the king. She admits that Yusuf told the truth that she sought to tempt him; she fully accepts her wrong doing which Allah would not allow to succeed. However, at the same time, she is sure that Allah will be merciful to her: “Verily my Lord is Ever Forgiving, Most Merciful” (verse 53). In the midst of the confession—and I am reading verses 51 and 52 to be a continuation of Zulaykha’s speech, a view supported by

³⁷ For example, Beeston, Baidawi, pp. 18-19; Ibn Kathir, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, vol 5, pp. 161-163; Mawdudi, Taffhim al-Qur’an, p. 167.

³⁸ Qortobi 9/1 in Al Sabouni, Safwat Atafasaseer, vol 2, p. 50.

³⁹ Azamakhshari, Jadallah, Al Kashaf, fi Ghareeb Al-Hadith, vol 2, p. 467.

Ibn Kathir—she declares that she has been true to Yusuf in his absence (verse 52), perhaps reiterating the point of verse 30 that she has truly been in love with Yusuf all along.⁴⁰

What does the story tell us about Zulaykha? That she is an attractive woman, but also a forward woman. Did she see in Yusuf the desire that he only manages to resist by the help of Allah? Did he give her some reason to think that her advances might be welcome? In fact, could she not really help herself because of his intense beauty? Ibn Kathir says as much: ‘that the Aziz is a gentle man and he is removed from the matter. The Aziz felt sorry for his wife because Yusuf is so beautiful’.⁴¹ Stowasser directs us to Al-Tabari who suggests that Joseph’s imprisonment is “a necessary societal measure, since the beautiful Joseph had become a *fitna* (“source of social chaos”), and such must be confined and concealed in order to protect the smooth workings of society.”⁴²

In a way, Zulaykha can be considered the more honest of the two major characters in the story. Although she is misguided and sinful in giving way to her desire to seduce Yusuf, nevertheless his beauty has drawn her in and she is honest about her desire. She is, in effect, more honest about her feelings than Yusuf. And she is faithful to those feelings, declaring that she has been true to them all the time that Yusuf has been in prison.

Stowasser suggests that in the ‘traditional scholarly exegesis’ the character of Zulaykha ‘loses much of her human fullness because of exegetic emphasis on this woman’s nature as symbol of the sexually aggressive, destabilizing, and dangerous nature of women as a whole’.⁴³ This is true. In the story, Zulaykha is a larger than life figure. She displays so many of the qualities that separately can be qualities that we all aspire to—passion, desire, quick wit, arguing and holding fast to a position, honesty (v. 51) and, in some ways, a kind of integrity. She is a person of large emotions and large actions, and

⁴⁰ Ibn Kathir in *Mukhtasar Ulum Al-Hadith* Cairo: Egypt, vol 5, p. 177 (although he appears to have Yusuf as the speaker in vs 52 on p. 174). For Zulaykha as the speaker in vv. 51-2 see also the translation and commentary in “The Holy Qur’an revised & edited by The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA Call and Guidance, King Fahd Holy Qur’an Printing Complex, Saudi Arabia.

⁴¹ Ibn Kathir in *Mukhtasar Ulum Al-Hadith*, vol 5 p. 178.

⁴² Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, p. 53.

⁴³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, p. 50.

although we can detail her weaknesses and strengths, as Stowasser says, “while many readings of the story are possible, ... the text itself is greater than the sum total of its many readings.”⁴⁴

As I have said, Zulaykha is vindicated in the climax of the story in the banquet scene. Both Baidawi and Ibn Kathir look back to the Hadith to try to explain what is happening to the women, and indirectly to Zulaykha, in this scene. Baidawi writes about the physical beauty of Joseph, quoting Muhammad who saw Joseph on the night of his ascension (night of Isra) looking “like the moon at its full”.⁴⁵ Ibn Kathir reports from the same Hadith that when Muhammad passed Yusuf in the third heaven he commented that Yusuf “was a half of all beauty”.⁴⁶ It could be argued that because of his status as prophet, the problem of Yusuf’s beauty is a singular case. However, there are other instances in which a man’s beauty is recorded as causing similar reactions in women. Baidawi quotes a panegyric by Mutanabbi about Hussayn bin. Ishaq who was apparently so handsome that girls who saw him menstruated: “Fear God and cover that beauty with a veil, for if you appear plainly the maidens in their chambers will menstruate.”⁴⁷ Granted this comment can be considered as hyperbole (mubalagha),⁴⁸ but the underlying meaning remains that men can be so beautiful that women are driven to lust after them and for this reason they must be concerned to be modestly dressed.

We have travelled a long way in space and time from the Australian beach to the life and times of Zulaykha and her love and desire for Yusuf. And yet the message of the story is relevant in any space and time for the basic makeup of human nature, for what drives the ordinary lives of women and men. Human bodies are beautiful and attractive for other humans, whether we are speaking of men’s bodies or women’s bodies. The Qur’an clearly tells us this and warns us that there is a need to keep this beauty safely covered before those who should not be tempted to inappropriate love in their appreciation of that beauty. I wonder if those Muslim men on the beach at Christmas understood that their

⁴⁴ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ Beeston, Baidawi, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, vol 5, p. 162.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Beeston, Baidawi, p. 19.

⁴⁸ My thanks to Tony Johns for help with the detail and literary form of the panegyric.

bodies were beautiful, not just to the women in their own family, but potentially to others on the beach. Or, is it that the Muslim men have embraced the Australian beach culture with gusto whilst still adhering to their literal interpretation of the Qur'anic passage on modesty.